ARE THEY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL?

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Abstract: ***Within a context of racial politics and hatred and violence in South Africa, Makhoere's No Child's Play emphasises the feminist virtue of love, affection and forgiveness. Sistren's Lionheart Gal is a collection of Caribbean women's experiences in fifteen testimonies and it can be viewed as a treatise of contemporary history of the community against the official histories. The two narratives tend to disrupt the values traditionally encoded in Western autobiographical practice.***

Index Terms: autobiography, trauma literature, witnessing.

The present study attempts to examine how women from marginalised communities of Jamaica as well as South Africa employed self-narrative as a strategy of resistance in identity politics by documenting trauma and strategies of survival, and through functioning as witness to their community's suffering. It also investigates the different ways these women use their narratives to connect their own circumstances with those of others of their marginalised and oppressed community, and their linking of the personal and the political. It scrutinises whether written in the polyphonic and protesting voice of participant-observers, the narratives/texts like *No Child's Play* (1988) and *Lionheart Gal* (2005) enter into the realm of testimonial literature and become active with identitarian idea against the hegemony of institutionalised discrimination as well as official history. How the women of these narratives make use of the "hybrid", "unheimlich" (literally un-homed rather than uncanny), "extra-literary", "nomadic and homeless" counter-discourse of *testimonio* as a "salvational genre" to theorise and politicise their experiences, to teach and to critique, is the matter of significance. It investigates how the narratives consist of an analysis of contemporary social problems followed by an agenda for political change.

Caesarina Kona Makhoere's *No Child's Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988) is a narrative of a Black South African woman student in her twenties sentenced in 1976 to five years' imprisonment under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act. The harshness of imprisonment is not the only issue that is proclaimed in its title. It also talks of the putting aside, by one of the "children of Soweto," of childish things. Makhoere was detained on October 25, 1976. It was her father, a policeman, who revealed her hiding place to the security police. She was interrogated, assaulted, tried and sentenced to five years imprisonment on October 27, 1977 after a year in detention. This year — 367 days — is represented in six pages. The rest of the narrative, just over a hundred pages, is devoted to five years. It covers the period she spent first in the women's section of the Kroonstad Gaol, then in Pretoria Central and Klerksdorp Prison. Nevertheless, the text is not centred mainly on the ordeal and the suffering of Makhoere. It focuses primarily on the prisoners' resistance in jail, and provides a paradigm of Black life in the narrower and the broader prison house of apartheid. The Soweto uprising in 1976, Makhoere's resolution to become a member of the ANC and to seek armed training, her subsequent arrest and six years in prison - all finds expression with a voice - young, strident, militant - filled with pain and defiance: "We had to adopt armed struggle" ;[1] "They have left us no alternative but to fight."[2]

Created in 1910, the Union of South Africa united British and Boer (Dutch) areas of the country. This white-controlled state imposed segregation on its populations of "Blacks" and "coloureds" (the populace with mixed white-Black ancestry). The discovery of gold, diamond and other valuable minerals made it essential for the five per cent white South Africans to dominate the remaining non-white South Africans.[3] The possessions of the most productive terra firma by whites were enforced through making law. Whites likewise ensured their quarrying of the vast treasure locked in the earth. Similarly, their exploitation of African labour and their complete hegemony over non-whites were put in force through legislation that left out the majority of the country. The 1913 Native Lands Act limited land ownership and settlement for Blacks and coloureds to restricted areas. Voting rights and political representation were for whites only. The Conciliatory Act of 1924, the Colour Bar Act of 1926, the Native Administration Act of 1927, the Land Act of 1936, the legislation of creating the African "homelands", the travel and pass acts, the statute on Bantu education, coloured education and Indian education – all were discriminatory. They were passed with the purpose of excluding non-whites from getting the best form of education, from casting vote, founding political parties, joining trade unions, participating in boycotts and strikes - above all, from governing South Africa alongside whites.

The Neo-Colonial practice of apartheid, a system of institutionalised racism, eventually became associated with the country. Apartheid seemed to represent an implemented anachronism. It was extreme in its disregard of human life, particularly that of its opponents. Those who opposed it had to encounter a gruesome form of incarceration. The apartheid system imposed strict legal sanctions against sex or marriage across racial barriers. The South African writer Bessie Head was the child of a rich white South African woman and a Black man who worked in her father's stables. Head was brought up in an orphanage after her mother was placed in a mental asylum for crossing the barrier.

[1] Makhoere, 6.
[2] Ibid., 121.
[3] Ibid.

Opposition to racist policies came from the African National Congress (ANC). It was founded in 1912. The purpose was to demand voting rights, freedom of residence, and land for Black Africans. White voters elected the openly racist National Party in 1948 with its platform of apartheid and commitment to complete segregation. Discrimination was extensively institutionalised. The 1950 Population Registration Act established legal registration by racial groups. The Group Areas Act prohibited Blacks from residing outside zoned areas. White officials sought to control opposition by passing security legislation. It permitted silencing of anyone opposed to racist policies through imprisonment and police violence.

The Sharpeville massacre took place in 1964 when the police killed many demonstrators. Nelson Mandela and other ANC and PAC (Pan-African Congress) leaders were sentenced to prison. Imprisonments were followed by torture and deaths of some in custody. When support of apartheid became violent, the anti-apartheid movement became stronger and more violent in response. Black demonstrations resulted in hundreds of deaths of protesters at the hands of police. During the 1970s, opposition to apartheid in Black townships forced the government to search for new ways to legitimise control.

The government took control of education from the missionary schools, creating a separate and inferior system for Black Africans. In 1976 the South African government designated Afrikaans as a mandatory language of instruction for most subjects in "Bantu" schools. A new generation of activists rose up. The school-children of Soweto went the township streets on June 16, 1976. It was on this date when the Afrikaans language was to be enforced in the schools. The youths' non-violent march was met that day by police and armed forces with teargas and then with gunfire. The incident left more than forty children dead in Soweto on that first afternoon alone.[4] Many more were killed. Thousands of the protesters wounded. And still greater numbers detained in the later months. The event marked another decisive juncture within the history of the South African resistance. The Soweto uprising is commemorated along with what has been called the apartheid government's "war on children."

In spite of its narration in the background of political strife, of discrimination, agony and trauma, in *No Child's Play* a different type of politics has been projected by the narrator. It is based on the value of caring, value of love, and above all the value of humanity. The point that I want to establish here is that within a context of racial politics and hatred and violence *No Child's Play* emphasises the feminist virtue of love, affection and forgiveness; and thus demonstrates a politics of a different nature aiming to enrich the society, to make it more humane and suitable for living in the best sense of the term. The matriarchal assertiveness in the narrative, therefore, is projected through an attitude of forgiveness and exoneration towards patriarchal authority, rather than that of criticism and accusation.

In an acrimonious scene of popular rebellion *No Child's Play* shows the clash of hegemony and resistance. The motive force of this insurgency is the retrieval of the human which apartheid has nearly annihilated in both the oppressed and the oppressors. Political battle is considered the most concrete means for return to human:

> We know what we want. Ours is a *just* struggle - the people shall govern. We have learned to *share*, here we have nothing; we have learned to build each other up, to give each other strength. We know our demands - the Freedom Charter demands. We know what we must do to live above all as *human* beings. Our future South Africa is being hammered out in our struggle today (emphasis added).[5]

It is this humanity that gets emphasised time and again in Makhoere's narrative. While remarkable for its articulation of anger, the narrative does not forget to remind the readers the universal values of care and forgiveness. In the first page itself they find that Makhoere can make excuses for her father's betrayal of her. This betrayal resulted in her imprisonment for five years. Almost unemotionally Makhoere explains that her father was a policeman that is, a member of the most hated and despised institution in South Africa. She describes him as a gentle man who was respected by the members of his community. Yet when he betrays his daughter, she says: "Even today I don't really blame him for everything that happened to me. He never deliberately tried to hurt me or my mother. He was trapped and could not help pointing out where I was hiding when I was on the run."[6] Although Makhoere portrays her father's weaknesses and his inability to articulate his reasons for sending his daughter to prison, she refuses to criticise him openly. Rather, her paternal affection is displayed when she calls up his visit to her to soothe her, to comfort her saying day after day: "Don't worry, my child. You know you didn't commit any crime. They must have at least some exhibit, some proof. I don't think they have any proof whatsoever. So I do not see you going to prison."[7] While it is known that it was he who was responsible for Makhoere's imprisonment, she does not forget to inform her readers that he was trapped into pointing out her hidden place; tried to get her out on bail later; and suffered a lot of mental torture. Makhoere realises that he is just a victim of the bigger system of all-annihilating apartheid that wipes out humanity from all strata of relationships. Recuperation of humanity is, therefore, the most important task. Makhoere tries to make the readers sympathise with her father:

[4] Harlow, 142.
[5] Makhoere, 121.
[6] Makhoere, 1.
[7] Makhoere, 1.

> When I was sentenced to five years he was so shocked. He cried like a baby, unashamedly. That was the last day I saw him alive, the last picture of my father I carried to prison. My mother told me afterwards that he was never the same again. I didn't see him again. He died a few months later.[8]

In this single act of betrayal, however, readers can realise how far the long arm of the apartheid government reached into the minds and hearts of Black South Africans. It has caused splitting families apart, shattering ideals of love and unity. But Makhoere sees here the larger betrayal. She takes her stance against a larger foe: the whole edifice of apartheid society. She has informed her readers that out of the eleven people who testified against her in the court, nine were Blacks from her own place. "Among the state witnesses there was a policeman's daughter, who really disappointed me after I had trusted her so much, as she had befriended me and I had confided in her as a friend."[9] Makhoere laments, "The other person who let me down was the Right Reverend Lekgotlo, who testified twice against me … All along I had thought that he understood our sufferings."[10] From the beginning itself Makhoere makes her readers realise that it is a complete revolution that is called for, and not merely the reconciliation between a father and his daughter.

Sistren that means 'sisters', grew out of the initiative of working-class women in 1977, was engaged in developing the awareness of its audiences on the issues related to Caribbean women; and explored the lives of women of Caribbean, from which they wrote plays, workshops and screen prints. *Lionheart Gal* is the collection of these women's experiences in fifteen testimonies from this Sistren Theatre Collective and it can be viewed as a treatise of contemporary history of the community against the official histories. The Sistren group was known for presenting the tough reality of day to day life the Caribbean women experience and also for addressing issues of violence, sexuality, gender and class, ageing, women's history and their creations. The stories of *Lionheart Gal* can be read individually as descriptions of the difficulties faced by the Jamaican women and their struggle with them; appealing details that are poignant, depressing, disheartening, but sometimes entertaining and even exciting. This "altering or re-defining of the parameters of political process and action" (Sistren with Honor Ford-Smith: xv - xvi) begins from within these Caribbean women's own lives. Many of the stories highlight, often with resentment, the complicity, ironically enough, of mothers keeping their adolescent daughters unaware of their female bodies. The bafflement of "let no boy trouble you" hardly prepare adolescent girls for the facts of body and life. Or, as the speaker in 'Rock Stone A River Bottom No Know Sun Hot' is told when she first gets her period: "Yuh turn big woman now… If yuh have anyting fi do wid a man, yuh wi get pregnant" (Sistren with Honor Ford-Smith: 49). The narrator herself confesses that she understands "notten bout pregnant" (Sistren with Honor Ford-Smith: 50). Many stories expressively describe the astonishment, distress, and sense of betrayal by one's female body. However, at the time of reporting by the women of their personally sorrowful experiences there is a remarkable lack of sentimentality. These women, in their own lives, insist on a demystification of female sexuality and on open discussions of these issues with their daughters.

The two selected texts tend to disrupt the values traditionally encoded in Western autobiographical practice. The uneasiness with or subjugation of the personal "I" is one of the most important aspects to be mentioned here. In recent years, of course, the expectations for autobiography have undergone considerable changes. This is partly because of the contributions of feminist and poststructuralist theories. The growing critical attention to texts produced by writers outside the dominant culture is also responsible behind it. In spite of this, the conventional understanding of the autobiographical genre is remaining more or less static. Therefore, from the traditionalist view the genre is seen as narrative ordering of an individual's own life. It illuminates, in the process of writing, his or her uniqueness. This very uniqueness ostensibly entitles a prospective writer to write his life story. It is the way in which the individual's life is distinguished from the lives of those surrounding him. The assumption is that the ideal autobiographical subject is one whose life achievements merit special recognition. In his seminal essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," Georges Gusdorf argued that "autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area: one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe."[11] He talks about the primary concern that motivates an autobiography. It is nothing but preservation of the self, the individual as he stands in relief to his environment. If Gusdorf's claims can be read as capturing the ethos of the Western autobiographical tradition, then *No Child's Play* and *Lionheart Gal* are situated against it. The texts are vehicles used less to explore and glorify the individual uniqueness of their narrators. Their main purpose is to examine those experiences that connect them to their communities.

[8] Makhoere, 2.
[9] Makhoere, 12.
[10] Makhoere, 12.
[11] Gusdorf, 29.

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